

HESPER

BY...

HAMLIN GARLAND

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Raymond's eyes flashed with a silent menace, but he did as he was told, and as he put the chair down for Ann he stated it with his hat.

Louis was husky voiced with joy. "Did you see that, Ann? I'll have to work that in somewhere."

Baker continued, in the same tone, "Can't you rustle a little grub for the company, Jack?"

Raymond curtly replied, "I'll try hard."

Baker, who was gaining self control, turned to Ann. "We have to humor our cooks out here. They're scarce and mighty uncertain in their minds—stop and shy at nothin', like a loosed steer."

Louis clapped his hands. "Oh, isn't the talk good, Ann? And these chairs—aren't they fine?"

"Cook made 'em," said Baker. "He's handy as a bootjack with tools."

Ann ignored the chairs, but studied the cook, whose curiously absorbed, sullen yet deft movements interested her. He appeared to be about thirty years of age, and his lean, powerful figure dignified the rough and dust stained clothes he wore. His profile was stern and manly, but his chin was youthful. His eyes she had not yet seen.

Raymond, on his part, was fairly amazed by the grace and youthful charm of his visitor. She reminded



him, as she stood there calmly looking about the grimy walls, of the stories he had read of princesses visiting the huts of their peasantry. She was of good height, but the proud lift of her head made her seem taller than she was, and the cut of her gown, the color of her gloves and hat, told of good taste and the service of the best tailors and milliners. "Great Scott!" he said to himself. "She's an up to date beauty. What will I do to feed her?" And, imperturbable as he looked, his heart sank within him, and if he could have died honorably he would have done so instantly.

Raymond took no pains to be noiseless or dainty in his work, but every moment told. He sloshed out the coffee pot and sliced the bacon and stirred up the fire, all with a grace and quiet dignity which opened Ann's eyes in an effort to understand him. His hands were noticeably fine, and the poise of his head expressed strength and pride. He was very brown, almost as brown as the leather cuffs he wore on his arms.

Once, when he passed out of hearing, she turned to Baker suddenly and asked: "Why does your cook wear spurs? An affection, I suppose."

Baker flushed and stammered. "Well, no; he has to help with the cattle once in awhile."

Raymond called to Perry, who was seated on the doorstep. "Perry, jump your horse and round up a dry cottonwood snag. This brush is of no sort of use. I want a hot fire."

Louis beamed on Ann. "He's talking just like Walter Owen's heroes."

Ann silenced him. "Hush! He'll hear you."

Baker, quite ready to take a fall out of Raymond, interposed: "He's a little hard at first, but reel sociable when you git him started. He's shy as a rabbit when they's any company round."

Raymond uttered a cough which made Baker start. "I guess I'll go out and see what that driver has done with his horses."

Louis sprang up. "I'll go, too, if you don't mind, sis."

As Ann looked round the low ceiled room in which the flies buzzed her eyes fell upon a little case of books in the corner. For lack of something better to do, she rose to inspect them. She was surprised to find them mainly essays, and wondered who of these men read Emerson and Burroughs. One of them was a book of verse. Raymond's name was on the fly leaf.

"How handsome the cook is!" was her inward exclamation as she returned to her seat. She was not one of those who sit in silence when they wish

information, and, lifting her voice a little, she said:

"I understood Mr. Barnett to say that you had a woman to cook for you?" Raymond shifted a stove lid. "We did."

"Where is she?"

"Gone—a week ago."

"Isn't there any woman about the place?"

He peered into the coffee pot. "No one but you."

Ann sat in silence for a moment. "I didn't understand. Mr. Barnett said—"

Raymond straightened and looked at her somberly. "If Barnett paid a little more attention to his ranch and less to polo—I wrote him, more than a week ago, that Jonesy was pullin' his freight." He returned to his cooking.

Ann composedly went on, "Was Jones the name of the foreman?"

"No, he was assistant; but he was married, and his wife was our dough twister. He's gone to Skytown gold camp. The whole country is full o' the fever."

Ann, with a note of sympathy in her voice, said: "I don't like to see a big, strong man cook. Do you get extra pay for it?"

"Not a cent. We all take turns at it, to tell the honest truth."

"I hope you're the best cook?"

"That wouldn't be saying much, lady. I cook in self defense."

Ann opened her eyes at the significance of this phrase. "Then you don't do it as a business?"

"Not by a whole row o' steers. Do you like prunes and rice?" he asked hastily.

Ann looked into the dish which he held out toward her and gravely replied: "I don't think I ever ate any. You don't mean they're cooked together?"

"That's what. It sure makes a filling combination," said he, dishing some out before her.

"I can well believe it," she replied, with a humorous intonation. "Let me taste it. Perhaps I'll like it." As she nibbled a little of the mess from the spoon she glanced up at him with a queer little smile that made the room whirl before his eyes. "It seems a nutritious mixture."

He recovered himself. "Oh, it's a hearty mess, all right. My cooking isn't fancy."

"I beg your pardon," Ann hastened to explain, "I didn't mean to criticize. I didn't intend to hurt your feelings. I'm sure it's a very tasty dish."

"Oh, I don't blame you; but, you see, we're not running a summer hotel exactly. Still, we'll make you as comfortable as we can while you stay."

"By which you mean to hint you hope I won't stay long?" She was frankly amused.

He became very sincerely grave. "I didn't say that, lady."

"But you meant it. I'm not obtuse. I know when I am out of place. I shall flee tomorrow."

She was forcing his hand, as he well knew, but he remained gravely simple. "I'll be sorry if our grub or anything else should scare you out."

She changed the subject quickly. "I can see that Louis is to be perfectly happy down here. I am glad I came. I shall feel much more resigned to his being here now that I have met Mr. Raymond and you."

Raymond remained inexpressive. "Your brother is an enthusiast, I believe you said. He'll be more charitable than—that you, for instance."

Ann didn't like his emphasis. "I don't wonder at your resentment. Our coming is an imposition; but if I had known—please be kind enough to admit that I didn't know how you were situated."

Raymond resumed his cowboy manner. "Now, lady, you let that go. I don't blame you a hair. You're here, and I'll see—I mean, the boss will see—we'll all see—that the boy is treated right, and I'll guarantee that he gets a fair share of what's going. I'm not apologizing, but I hope you won't take us on the wrong slant. I hope you'll come often. You brighten up the place wonderfully."

Ann drew herself up. "I don't understand you, Mr.—"

"Call me Cook—Mr. Cook. Anything goes out here."

They were now squared before each other, he with a malicious smile lurking at the corner of his mouth, she with dark and puzzled brow.

"Of course, you cowboys are all strange to me—I mean your manners and customs—but my roommate at college told me a good deal about this life. She was from Colorado."

He betrayed new interest. "What was your college? Smith?"

Ann lifted her eyebrows in surprise. "No. What made you think it was?"

Raymond began to retreat. "Oh, I don't know. You seemed about that style. I mean to say, you carry yourself like a Smith college girl that came down here once with Mrs. Barnett."

He caught up the water bucket. "Excuse me a minute. I'll run down to the spring and get some water." His going was equivalent to flight.

Ann smiled composedly as she sipped her coffee, which was very good indeed.

Louis burst in at the door. "Sis, you ought to see the corral out here. They have ninety head of horses! Think of that! And I'm to ride all I want to."

Baker, who appeared just behind

him, put in a drawling word: "Peared like he wanted to ride four to once, like a circus man. Are you gettin' somethin' to eat, miss?"

"Oh, yes, indeed."

Louis, throwing down his cap in imitation of Raymond, cried out, "I'm hungry!"

Ann turned to Baker. "Mr. Foreman, isn't there something mysterious about your cook? Part of the time he speaks like a man of the world and part of the time like a rancher. I think he's playing a part, and playing it badly."

"What makes you think so?" asked Louis. "They say he's a bully rider."

"They ain't none better, miss," replied Baker, who began to look a little uneasy.

Ann pursued her point. "I think he's one of those romantic cowboys who have seen better days—perhaps an English nobleman in disguise."

Baker was always ready when a chance to get even with Raymond offered itself. He puckered his plump face into a frown of deep concern. "I guess you're some right, miss, but he ain't no English lord, I don't think. We never inquire very close into a man's pedigree out here if he can ride a cayuse and flip a gun. But he's American, all right, and a good cook."

"Is Cook his real name?"

Baker became cautious. "Did he say his name was Cook? If he did, that goes, I'm not in the habit of disputing him."

"No, he didn't tell his name, but he intimated that I might call him Cook. Your name is Raymond, isn't it?"

Baker was again slow to answer. "Did he intimate that my name was Raymond?"

Ann after looking at him in silence remarked gravely, "Of course, you're both having fun with us because we're from the east, and I don't think it quite nice in you."

Baker began to look distressed. "Oh, see here, miss, you mustn't think—you're all wrong! Why, we're delighted—we—you see—"

Ann turned to Louis. "Louis, you are living out one of Owen's stories this very minute. I want you to stay here until you can meet these people on their own ground." She faced Baker again. "Tell me more about this cook. He's a college man, and there's some hidden mystery, as the story books say. What brought him to this pass? Is he a fugitive from justice?"

Baker took a seat and appeared to ponder. "Well, now, I don't like to say. You see, it ain't safe to tell tales on Cook. If you'll swear not to breathe a word—"

"Hold up your hands, Louis, and swear!" cried Ann. "Of course we won't tell."

Baker settled into his chair. "You mustn't blame him till you hear the hull story, but he killed a feller back east, somewhere in Illinois."

Ann started melodramatically. "Really?"

Baker, pleased with his success, added, "Two of 'em, in fact."

Louis, wide eyed with interest, "What did he do it for?"

Baker, glowing with pleasure in the work of his own imagination, cut loose from his moorings. "It was this way: He was courting a girl—the daughter of a rich farmer—and her family was hot because Rob was poor, and her dad put another fellow on to tell lies about Rob's drinkin' and all that, and Rob met up with this feller and just naturally piped him full of soft nose bullets. That led him to seek higher altitudes, as the newspapers say. Now, that's the plain truth of the whole business, as I heard it."

Louis pursued the inquiry. "Who was the other man he killed?"

"The deppity sheriff. Had to do that to get away."

Ann looked about. "You say he reads these books?"

"When he has time. He dotes on 'em."

"Do you read them?"

"Great Scott, no! I'd go to sleep over such things. 'The Boy's Own' is about my size."

Ann's tone was reflective. "That's queer. Mr. Barnett said you were a great reader."

Baker paled, then got red. He had walked into a clever little trap. He wriggled in his chair. "Did he say that? Well—I used to, but lately—"

Ann looked at him keenly and said calmly: "You also are an impostor. Your name isn't Raymond—you're not the foreman. You are all bandits and have stolen my cousin's ranch and are running it to suit yourselves. I believe you killed poor old Mr. Jones and his wife."

Louis sprang to his feet. "Ann, what do you mean?"

Baker threw up both hands. "Hold on! Don't shoot! I'll come down. I knew I couldn't keep the game going." He rose, and his manner changed.

"Now listen. I'll tell you the square told truth. It was my turn to cook, and Raymond—that's our boss—when he heard you was comin', knowin' I couldn't cook sour bran mash, says: 'Baker, you'll have to play boss while the company's here. I've got to toss up the bacon and prunes. Now that's the fact, lady.'"

Ann, with conviction, turned to Louis: "Now I believe he's telling the truth. What is your name?"

"John Edwin Baker—Jack, the boys call me. I never had any other name. I'm sorry to say, and I came here from Kansas. I never killed anything bigger'n a coyote. I'm just a plain cow puncher at twenty-six per month."

Raymond, reappearing at the door, put them all into guilty confusion. His eyes were too keen to be withstood, and Ann's lashes fell for a moment as he offered the dipper. "Like a cool drink, lady?"

She recovered herself instantly. "Thank you, if you will be so kind."

Raymond threw a glance at Baker that propelled him through the doorway as palpably as a kick, then turned to Louis. "How does the grub go, youngster?"

"Bully!" replied the boy as he took

up a spoonful of rice. His eyes followed the little figure of the rancher with joy.

Ann cut in with a grave face, belied by something in her voice. "I didn't suppose a foreman would stoop to cook."

The young fellow frowned. "What's that?"

Ann went on, "I think it's nice of you, Mr. Raymond, to abase yourself to the rim of a kettle."

"Excuse me, lady, but"—He looked about for Baker.

Ann interposed. "That's twice you've called me 'lady.' No real cowboy ever does that, I'm told, so you must be an impostor."

Raymond's face flushed with anger. "See here! What has that fat jackass been saying to you about me?"

Ann, calmly smiling, made her charges specific. "You're not the cook. You're called Robert Raymond. You're the foreman and a graduate of Harvard university, like all superior cowboys, and you have gallantly volunteered to cook in order that we might eat. Now, isn't this true?"

Raymond was stunned for a moment, but as she went on his head lifted, and into his eyes leaped a spark of red light. "Wait till I sight that scoundrel. You'll have a fine chance to study a cowboy in action. What else did he say?"

"He told us all about your fight with your rival. It was very thrilling. It's like being a character in a novel oneself. I'm quite exalted by the thought."

Raymond's eyes ceased to glow, a faint smile quivered at the corners of his lips as he bowed gracefully. "Miss Rupert, permit me to astonish you still more. My name, though alliterative, is my own. I have never killed a man"—he looked toward the door—"that incredible ass will be my first. I am not a graduate of Harvard, and I did not leave my native town between two days. Does this disappoint you?"

"Most deeply. Are there no mitigating circumstances?"

"None whatever. I am hopelessly commonplace. I'm not even a cowboy. I'm foreman of a hay ranch."

"You destroy our dreams. But these books are yours?"

Raymond's eyes wavered. "Well, yes—some of them, but I don't care to pose as the student rancher. The boys respect me now because I can ride a horse and pitch hay. I make it a point not to air my other accomplishments."

He was interrupted by a series of faint yells, and as they all listened the swift trample of horses' hoofs could be heard. Louis sprang up, all excitement, his eyes glowing.

"What is that—Indians?"

Raymond smiled at Ann. "No, only a bunch of cowboys passing. We stepped to the door to study their approach. It's a mob of Williams' men. I don't know what they're doing here."

The rush and trample of hoofs swept nearer, and a group of five drab colored horsemen drew up at the hitching pole with loud outcries, each man setting his pony on end with a wrench at the reins.

"Hello, Bob!" shouted the leader.

"Howdy, boys—howdy?" he replied coldly. It was plain he was not well pleased by their inopportune call.

"Got anything to eat?" asked one of them as he swaggered up.

"Sure thing. Tidy up and come in." Raymond, turning to Ann, said gently: "Perhaps you and the boy had better step into the other room. This gang is coming in."

"They're not dangerous?"

"No, but some of them are not fit to eat in the presence of a lady."

"Louis will want to see your guests."

"Very well," replied Raymond and turned to meet his visitors, who appeared fresh from a hasty toilet.

"Come right in, boys. What's the best word from over the ridge?"

The man who entered first was a big, rawboned, wide mouthed, freckle faced fellow, who gaped in amazement as he caught sight of Ann. "Hello! What's all this?" he asked, hunching the man next him.

The insolent vulgarity of his tone brought a flush of anger to Raymond's face. "Shut up!" he commanded in a low voice. Then added in explanation, "Some of Barnett's folks visiting the ranch." At the moment he hated them all with a sudden realization of their essential cheapness and their filthy manners.

As they took seats each man glanced at Ann with furtive, devouring eyes, and she thrilled under the scrutiny as she would have done beneath the glare of a wolf. She had a sudden sense of danger. "I am getting close to the elemental man," she thought, and by contrast Raymond assumed new interest. Though his clothing was almost as rough as theirs, his face and voice betrayed good blood and refinement. She wondered whether Wayne Peabody could stand between such a mob of ruffians and a woman. This man Raymond dominated them easily.

Louis sat as one entranced studying the groupings in the sunset light, which had begun to dim a little. To him these men were heroic. Their physical hardihood, their slouching grace, their rumpled hair, their tag ends of kerchiefs and greasy belts and cuffs were all "bang up material." The avid glare under which Ann shivered was hidden from the eyes of the boy, but Raymond took note of every nudge, every wink that passed, and once or twice he fixed his eyes on the man they called Speckle in a look which stayed a coarse jest upon his lawless lips.

They talked of the great, new mining camp on the side of Mogalyon, whereto they were all bound. "They're striking it rich in the grass roots, and we're going up to take a hand in it. Why, last week they made three strikes on Pine mountain within fifteen feet of the surface. They say the placer is turning out \$10 a day. So we're riding up to turn a rock on our own account. The cattle business is done for. Gold chasing is the game now."

"Say, Raymond," called out a little man down by the stove, "you'd better

hustle out your gang and meet that fire. It's coming right over the ridge this way and is getting worse every minute."

Raymond's face betrayed keen interest. "I've been trying to locate that fire all day. It's over about Round Top, isn't it?"

"Oh, no. It's away this side. Looks like it's sure to take Williams' hay if he don't watch out, and yours too."

"Why didn't you ride over and see just where it was?" asked Raymond.

"Too busy," Speckle replied loudly, and the others laughed. "I'm after gold now. I'm sick o' forkin' hay."

Raymond's voice grew sterner. "You didn't leave Williams short handed to fight that fire?"

"No matter whether we did or not; we've got done. Our time was up; we've got our pay. He can fight his own fire; we're not responsible." They all laughed as though this were a good joke.

Raymond's next words were as cold and calm as they were unexpected. "You get up and get out o' here, every man of you. I mean now." His anger broke out as they started. "I don't

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